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The rape of our privacy

WASHINGTON—In the new Soviet embassy compound atop the District of Columbia's Mt. Alto, 350 feet above sea level, laser-beam listening devices are being installed by Soviet technicians. They have a clear line of sight to the White House and the Capitol. Aimed at windowpanes, the super-bugs will be able to pick up conversations in all the rooms with north-facing windows.

During the Nixon administration, our National Security Agency joined with the CIA and the FBI in objecting, in writing, to the assignment of Mt. Alto to the Russians. Somebody overrode those objections. As a result, the Russians have a huge advantage in electronic espionage. Seventy percent of all local telephone conversations in the capital will be wide open to Mt. Alto's Big Ear.

What are we doing about it? President Reagan has signed a National Security Decision Directive ordering millions of "secure" phones with underground lines, at huge expense, for government officials and defense contractors. That costly scrambling will be quickly overcome; moreover, the vast majority of private calls in our capital, including those that make the Russians such wizards in commodity trading, would go completely undefended in a country whose citizens are supposedly to

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be protected from "unreasonable searches."

The way to stop this rape of our privacy is to inform the Russians that such espionage is against our law and to make them stop it.

Ah, no, say some of our spooks. You see, we do the same thing over there, albeit from a much less advantageous spot. If we stop their listening, they'll stop ours; since theirs is a closed society, we learn a lot more about them than they do about us.

I wonder about that conventional wisdom. Years ago, when we were secretly bugging their limousine transmissions, we knew which marshal was seeing which prima ballerina, causing much cackling at Langley. But that edge is gone; both sides know of the other's surveillance. Are we really getting more relevant data than we are losing? Is the demeaning trade necessary?

New York Sen. Daniel P. Moynihan has put forward the Foreign Surveillance Protection Act to slam the door, but it is opposed by the administration. That is not the only attempt to stop known Russian spying that Reagan resists. In the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, more than 200 Russian nationals

make the beds, serve the food and spy.

Last March, we learned that the typewriters in our Moscow embassy were transmitting everything written to the White House directly to the Kremlin.

A bill in the House would require replacement of all Soviet citizens by Americans in our Moscow embassy within a year. The State Department response: How about half? That would mean only the best KGB personnel would continue to make the beds. Under congressional pressure, State says the central U.S. facility there will be free of Russians, but that the compound will have drivers and others who are not Americans.

Why? State is fearful that the Americans will be seduced and turned into spies, that they won't be as effective in getting people on the phone, that they may get in trouble or accidents. Apparently it would rather have full-time KGB agents on the premises than U.S. citizens, because—get this—such close contact keeps our diplomats security-conscious, and enables them to send messages by talking to the chandeliers.

If William Casey and George Shultz have gone so soft on secrets, our secrets, the time is overdue for rigorous congressional oversight.

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